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SUBJECT: BLACK HISTORY MONTH SPEAKER RANSOM ELECTRIFIES  
TURKMENISTAN

SUMMARY

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11. (U) At a watershed moment in Turkmenistan's modern history, Black History Month Speaker Dr. Elbert Ransom energized and inspired audiences in Ashgabat, Mary and Dashoguz during his visit to Turkmenistan from March 8-16. Dr. Ransom's bold oratory style, unusually warm personality and gripping retelling of key events of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement had its greatest impact with large student groups at universities in Ashgabat and Mary and with U.S. Government alumni and civic activists. A meeting with members of a government Trade Union provided a stark contrast -- revealing local government officials' lack of confidence in, or basic understanding of the role of unions, schools and civic groups in a democracy. But as one professor of History at Turkmen State University whispered to an embassy officer, "He has opened my eyes." Post is eager to follow up with further programming to capitalize on this positive reaction, at a time when the local government and public of Turkmenistan is facing an uncertain transition to greater openness and may not fully grasp the potential -- both positive and negative -- of social change. Post is grateful for the support of IIP for Dr. Ransom's visit. End Summary.

FILM FESTIVAL IN CELEBRATION OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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12. (U) As part of Dr. Ransom's program, post, in cooperation with Turkmenistan's Ministry of Culture and Television and Radio Broadcasting, hosted a Black History Month Film Festival at Ashgabat's Magtymguly State Music and Drama Theater on March 9-12. The films -- "Mighty Times: The Story of Rosa Parks," "The Color Purple," "Ray" and "Malcolm X" were in English, while the concluding film, "Amistad" was in English with Russian subtitles. State media turned out full coverage of the March 9 opening event and the festival (septel). Each screening drew 70-130 people, many from Ashgabat's universities, where Dr. Ransom and concurrent U.S. Speaker Dr. James Gregory Payne had recently given presentations. Because of restrictions on advertising publicly, post handed out flyers on the film festival to students and teachers at each event. (Note: Public Affairs staff also "talk up" events and embassy resources in taxi cabs and other chance venues as a standard practice, because post is prohibited from posting flyers in public spaces without coordinating this formally with the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs. End Note.)

13. (U) Dr. Ransom introduced the first film, the IIP documentary, "Mighty Times," with personal on-stage remarks about Rosa Parks and segregation in the southern United States; the film depicted how the mild but deliberate action of Rosa Parks -- refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man in contravention of local segregation laws -- sparked the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Diplomats and students at the event clamored to meet Dr. Ransom after the screening, and Turkmen State Television took interviews with Dr. Ransom, PAO, and speaker Dr. Payne.

YOUNG AUDIENCES OPEN, WELCOMING AND EXPRESSIVE  
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14. (U) Dr. Ransom was universally well received by young audiences at Turkmen State University (where he spoke twice, to students of the English and history faculties), Turkmen-Turkish University, the Azadi World Languages Institute and the Mary Power-Engineering Institute (in Mary City), Turkmen-Turkish High School (for boys, in Ashgabat) as well as at the Mary and Dashoguz American Corners, Counterpart Civil Society Resource Center in Ashgabat, and the Ashgabat International School. Probably the greatest visible reaction to Dr. Ransom's and Dr. Payne's (septel) programs was at the International Turkmen-Turkish University, where an audience of 200 engaged with Dr. Ransom in a lively question-and-answer session that showed student interest in both the personal and political aspects of the Civil Rights Movement.

15. (U) In these meetings Dr. Ransom recounted how he came to become a friend of and work as an aide to Dr. Martin Luther King when he was a 17 year-old college student in Montgomery, Alabama, and how Dr. Ransom participated in and helped organize events, such as the

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Montgomery bus boycott, that eventually ended with the U.S. Supreme Court overturning segregation laws. These descriptions supported Dr. Ransom's message that the Civil Rights Movement was born of many forces, including the arrest of Rosa Parks, concerted efforts to educate the black community about its rights, and Dr. King's nonviolent leadership in a time of emotional upheaval and violence against the black community. Dr. Ransom discussed the role of law enforcement and passive resistance to unjust laws at post's third annual Fulbright Conference on Interdisciplinary Study of the United States, which focused this year on Rule of Law - in education, international relations, legal reform and international and local communications policy.

A DIFFICULT MESSAGE, DELIVERED BY A FRIEND  
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16. (U) Being a black man in Turkmenistan itself made Dr. Ransom an object of curiosity and positive interest during his time in Turkmenistan. Members of several audiences asked whether Dr. Ransom believed in mixed marriages, to which he could describe his own experience in a mixed marriage -- a story which helped reinforce his point that both black and white people supported and took part in the Civil Rights Movement. His background as a vocalist and preacher was also fair game: audiences at Turkmen State University, Azadi Institute, the Power-Engineering Institute and the American Corners asked him to sing -- and he did, to loud applause. In this heavily relationship-based society, audiences reacted immediately to Dr. Ransom's warmth and self-deprecating humor, which also helped soften -- but did not distract from -- Dr. Ransom's very bold message: that abused or repressed individuals must eventually rise up to gain freedom; and that such action must be bold and nonviolent in order to affect lasting social change.

CIVIC ACTIVISTS SEE THEMSELVES IN THE RIGHTS MOVEMENT  
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17. (U) Ransom struck a chord with like-minded activists in a discussion of the Civil Rights Movement on March 13 at the Mary American Corner. After a shy start with ten local activists, who are used to working in the shadows, the meeting quickly became collegial as Dr. Ransom demonstrated the similarities between the

barriers he personally experienced and those facing civil society representatives in Turkmenistan. The local activists expressed shock at the violence and overt discrimination of the 1950's and 1960's, and wished for intense but peaceful change in Turkmenistan.

¶8. (U) Speaking of the social and practical support that the black community renders to its members, Ransom highlighted one of the greatest disadvantages to local civic activists -- a dearth of adequate community centers and networking. An alumna of the Cochran Fellowship program, who is also a leader of the Ilkinjiler farmer's resource center, noted that Turkmenistan's farmers are only just beginning to find their voice. An activist who works with disabled children noted that, under the Soviet system, such social action was mandated and prescribed. It was only now that, thanks to increased Internet access and direct interaction with foreign embassies and speakers, individuals and government institutions were starting to learn about the developmental benefits of and need for grassroots social action.

¶9. (U) The participants picked up on Dr. Ransom's musical background and by the end of the meeting he was leading a group rendition of "We Shall Overcome"; this provided a stark contrast to the doubt and insecurity that often plagues civic activists in this politically repressive environment. Through a warm and deeply personal appeal, Dr. Ransom both motivated and gently challenged those present to continue pressing ahead for greater social freedoms and political change.

#### PUZZLED RECEPTION AT LABOR UNIONS

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¶10. (U) In contrast with his warm reception at educational institutes, the reaction of labor unions to Ransom's ideas was cautious and bemused, though positive. (Note: Local labor unions

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are purely government-run organizations whose leadership is appointed by the Government of Turkmenistan). In the meeting at the national Labor Union headquarters in Ashgabat, Dr. Ransom described again how Rosa Parks' act of nonviolent civil disobedience sparked the Civil Rights Movement, and how the Movement was incubated in and supported by the churches and other community centers of Montgomery's black community. By contrast, Turkmenistan's labor unions -- really one state organization with regional and local branches throughout Turkmenistan -- are strangers to such grassroots activism.

¶11. (U) The participants of the Ashgabat meeting -- members of the Ashgabat City and Ahal Welayat unions -- sat quietly in the meeting, to which they had clearly been called by their supervisors with little or no background on the impending content. One participant in the Ashgabat meeting, an alumna of an International Visitor Leadership Program, nodded and smiled at Ransom's suggestion that labor unions could have an important role to play in promoting civic education and civic responsibility. But Ransom was unable to elicit substantive comments or discussion from this cautious group.

¶12. (U) Dr. Ransom's meeting with members of the regional and city labor union in Dashoguz City was more clearly positive, though participants did not venture beyond questions about Dr. Ransom's family.

¶13. (U) Throughout the day trip to Dashoguz, the head of the regional Labor Union accompanied Dr. Ransom, and spoke openly about his desire for reform in the education sector, among other issues. "I didn't know Americans were so friendly" he told a PD FSN at one point, and was eager to know Dr. Ransom's views on current U.S. foreign policy; he eventually posed the question, despite the local taboo of asking direct political questions of guests.

#### COMMENT

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¶14. (U) Dr. Bert Ransom had a more immediate and dramatic impact than any of post's previous speakers. He was careful to learn what

he could about local conditions and his interlocutors and made a great effort to tailor his message appropriately. Dr. Ransom managed to strike exactly the right tone: hoping for future change, and stressing the power of community action and individuals, but without causing too much host government discomfort. Post would highly recommend Dr. Ransom for other speaker programs and would welcome him for a return visit.

¶15. (U) In contrast to the events of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the political transition taking place in Turkmenistan began incidentally -- with the sudden death in December 2006 of President Saparmyrat Niyazov -- and the current government and population are united in their desire for continued stability and peace in Turkmenistan. In this context Dr. Ransom encouraged local audiences to reflect on their own desires and potential and make the hard decision to push for progress, but recognized local fears of violence or upheaval. End Comment.

¶16. Dushanbe minimize considered.

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